

## REVIEW OF ELECTRONIC LITERACIES: LANGUAGE, CULTURE AND POWER IN ONLINE EDUCATION

### Electronic Literacies: Language Culture and Power in Online Education

Mark Warschauer

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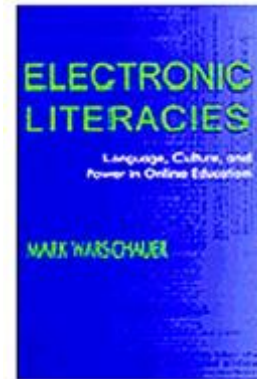
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### OVERVIEW

As we move into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is becoming increasingly clear that success in our present and future academic, social, and workforce environments requires proficiency in the multiplicity of discourses represented in the varied communication systems made possible by developing technologies (New London Group, 1996; Murray, 1991). As Warschauer notes in his book, "becoming fully literate in today's society, at least in the industrialized world, means gaining competent control of representational forms in a variety of media and learning how those forms best combine in a variety of genres and discourses" (p. 177). Digital technologies such as the Internet are rapidly changing our perception and definition of literacy, and this change demands research to clarify the complex interrelationships that exist among new electronic literacies, educational practices, and reform, and struggles for social and cultural equality.

Warschauer's book, *Electronic Literacies*, describes one of the early research studies to document the role of the Internet and other new digital technologies in the development of language and literacy. The book represents a revised version of Warschauer's doctoral dissertation at the University of Hawai'i and provides rich ethnographic data based upon his study of Internet use by a sample of culturally and linguistically diverse students in four language and writing classes in Hawai'i. Warschauer maintains that in their pursuit of literacy, these student populations often fall victim to inequalities in terms of technological access, language and discourse access, and cultural appropriation. In *Electronic Literacies*, Warschauer skillfully weaves the data he collected into an interdisciplinary theoretical base to describe his view of the relationship of technology to language, literacy, education, culture, and class.

### DESCRIPTION

The book is divided into six chapters, an epilogue, and an appendix. The major portion of the book (chapters 2 through 5, the epilogue, and the appendix) offers detailed descriptions of the four classes observed, the educational practices resulting from the experience, and the procedures followed in the context of the research study. Chapters 1 and 6 offer a concise and cogent historical analysis of literacy practices and present a theoretical foundation and rationale for the study and teaching of electronic literacies in particular. While chapters 1 and 6 represent the theoretical bookends that provide a context in which to interpret the results of the study, theory is woven into each of the other chapters. Thus, the reader benefits from concrete illustrations of theory in practice, as well as from examples of instances in which there was lack of fit between the two.

Chapter 1, "Surveying the Terrain of Literacy," offers an historical analysis of the socioeconomic and technological bases that form "the terrain of literacy." Chapters 2 through 5 report in depth on each of the four classes researched. In chapter 2, "Computers, Composition, and Christianity," Warschauer describes his study of Mary's class, an undergraduate English as a second language (ESL) writing class at a small Christian college. According to Warschauer (p. 43), Mary's class "effectively served as a pilot for the remainder of the classrooms studied" because it "clarified the questions and situations [he] wanted to investigate [and] strengthened his interest in working with teachers who had a critical perspective on language, writing, and education." Chapter 3, "Networking into Academic Discourse," describes Warschauer's work with Luz' class, a graduate ESL writing class at a large public university. Chapter 4, "Computer-Assisted Language Revitalization," describes Kapuli Manaole's Hawaiian 201 class, a third semester Hawaiian language class which focused on reading, writing, speaking, listening, grammar, and culture, and in which Warschauer simultaneously played the roles of researcher, colleague, assistant, and student. Chapter 5, "Cyber Service Learning," describes Warschauer's experiences with Joan's English writing class at Bay Community College in O'ahu. Joan's class participated in a service learning project, "a form of experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs together with structured opportunities intentionally designed to promote student learning and development" (Jacoby, 1996, p. 5, as cited in Warschauer, 1999, p. 127).

In Chapter 6, "Conclusion: Striving Toward Multiliteracies," Warschauer sums up and interprets the results of his research, drawing conclusions about the relation of new online technologies to literacy, education, and culture. Warschauer offers his views on the nature of electronic literacies and the need to define educational practices and suggest educational reforms, for example. He then discusses the inequalities in technological access, language and discourse access, and cultural appropriation that plague culturally and linguistically diverse students as they strive to become literate in a digital society.

The book concludes with an epilogue that describes the educational practices and reforms implemented by the four teachers in the semesters subsequent to the study. Finally, an appendix details the ethnographic approach and methods Warschauer used to research the online classroom.

## **EVALUATION**

Electronic Literacies represents a much-needed contribution to the field of literacy and language education. Its well-balanced synthesis of relevant theory and pedagogical practice, as well as Warschauer's clear writing style make the book not only relevant, but also accessible to a wide audience of readers, both those with a good deal of experience in online education as well as those with none at all. As someone interested in the relationships that exist among technology, literacy, and language education, I found Warschauer's concise and cogent historical analysis of literacy practices and his presentation of the theoretical and practical foundations for electronic literacies to be particularly valuable. In addition, it is clear that Warschauer has researched his topic well, and his reference list provides the interested reader with a plethora of additional resources that can be used to further knowledge on this topic.

Balance is one of the key strengths of this book, in terms of both the design of the study described and the conclusions drawn from it. Warschauer's research design included students representing diverse

populations, including those studying the Hawaiian language and those studying English as a first or second language. Because he studied diverse populations, his data are applicable to a broader audience of readers. The conclusions drawn and the recommendations made from the data are also balanced, taking into account the pros and cons of using technology in language and literacy education. While Warschauer is clearly in favor of technology use in education, he realizes that it does not represent a panacea for learning and literacy problems. In keeping with this realization, Warschauer is careful to address the concerns of both technophiles and technocritics and to point out weaknesses in the outcomes of his own study. Such a balanced presentation and discussion of data are critical to structured research, and it makes the book a valuable and reliable source of information.

Too often reading professional books is simply a matter of picking and choosing the sections and/or chapters that are most relevant to our own needs and interests. However, I believe that educators will, and I strongly recommend that they do, take the time to read *Electronic Literacies* from cover to cover. For whether those readers embrace, abhor, or are reticent with regard to technology in education, they will be prompted by this book to revisit and critically examine both their views on this issue and the bases for those views.

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## ABOUT THE REVIEWER

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